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TO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3164
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0571
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 0429
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY 3985
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 4212
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ROME 000083

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2020

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF SECRETARY GATES TO ROME

Classified By: Ambassador David H. Thorne for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶11. (C) Mr. Secretary, Mission Italy and I look forward to hosting you in February, as does Minister La Russa and the Government of Italy. In anticipation, I met with La Russa on January 19. He is delighted that you have accepted his invitation and is working hard to ensure that your meetings in Rome showcase the U.S.-Italian bilateral defense relationship that he was worked so hard to strengthen and expand. Whether on Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Abu Omar Case, and now assistance in Haiti, La Russa, with the active support of FM Frattini, has been our champion in the Italian interagency, pushing our case with a high measure of success.

Your visit comes at a high point in our recent political military relations and will demonstrate publicly that Italy is within the closest circle of our European partners, facilitate parliamentary approval of Italy's commitment of 1,000-1,200 new troops for Afghanistan and empower La Russa to deliver on some other key U.S. objectives. The value of our relationship with Italy lies not only in what we do together overseas but also the reach and freedom of action that the seven U.S. bases on Italian soil afford U.S. forces.

Your visit provides La Russa with the momentum to break the impasse over two of our most important basing issues: the GOI's refusal to recognize Navy Support Site Grignano (near Naples) as a military installation; and local political opposition to the Navy's proposed satellite communications site in Niscemi, Sicily. Hearing that you view these as important U.S. priorities will give him the clout to deliver on these vital operational issues. Finally, La Russa will want to demonstrate to you that he has done everything possible to convince the courts to recognize the U.S. assertion of primary jurisdiction in the case against USAF COL Romano.

La Russa: A Friend of the U.S. Who Delivers

¶12. (C) I met with La Russa on January 19, shortly before he sent the Aircraft Carrier Cavour to Haiti with a cargo of aid supplies and helicopters to deliver them (thereby avoiding the backlog at the Port-au-Prince Airport). His approach to the Haiti crisis is typical of his style: he is an action-oriented leader who gets things done with little fuss or fanfare. He has been the strongest voice in the cabinet in favor of our shared security interests, particularly in Afghanistan. He responded immediately to your telephone call on November 25 with a concerted effort to generate a troop commitment. He and FM Frattini convinced PM Berlusconi to approve and announce a 1,000 troop increase before consulting with Parliament, thereby ensuring that Italy would be among

the first in NATO to announce, and that skeptics in Parliament would fall into line with what the GOI portrayed as much as a gesture of solidarity with President Obama as a step for Italian national interests. La Russa continues to do the difficult behind-the-scenes work with the Minister of Finance to find funds for the mission, with the result that MOD planners tell us that the 1,000 troop increase is likely to become a de facto 1,200 increase by November 2010 (an increase from the 2,790 mandated average of 2009 to 3,970). Although Berlusconi enjoys a comfortable majority in Parliament, La Russa and Frattini may face hard questions about the size and expense of the commitment. Your visit will do much to bolster their case and ensure that Afghanistan remains Italy's top foreign policy priority.

Getting to Yes on the MUOS Satellite Antenna Array

¶3. (C) La Russa's help will also be crucial in securing approval for the U.S. Navy's planned construction of a MUOS (Mobile User Objective System) antenna site in Niscemi, Sicily. A campaign of local political opposition in Sicily has prevented the U.S. Navy from obtaining final approval to begin construction of this fourth and final ground station for the MUOS system. When it comes on line in 2012, MUOS will allow U.S. (and NATO) troops anywhere in the world to communicate instantly with headquarters in CONUS or elsewhere. Given that the project is seriously behind schedule (the Navy must begin construction by March 2010 or contemplate moving the site elsewhere in the Mediterranean), I have asked La Russa to help us make headway with Sicilian

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Regional President Lombardo, whose office has withheld the necessary approvals. La Russa has agreed to do so, but hearing from you that MUOS is a U.S. priority will spur him to expend the substantial political capital in his home region to ensure that the project moves forward.

Breaking the Logjam on NSS-Gricignano

¶4. (C) Your visit will also help to move the ball forward on COMNAVEUR-NAVAF ADM Fitzgerald's single most difficult basing issue at Naples: securing Italian recognition of Navy Support Site Gricignano (NSS-Gricignano) as a military installation under the 1951 NATO SOFA and 1954 U.S.-Italy Bilateral Infrastructure Agreement (BIA). The U.S. has invested over USD 500 million to build Gricignano, which is the logistics support hub for all U.S. Navy Commands in the Mediterranean, the site of the chief Naval hospital for the European Region, two DOD schools, and residential housing for approximately 3,000 U.S. Navy Servicemembers and their families. In 2008, during negotiations to update the Naples-area basing agreement, the Italian Defense General Staff informed us that we could no longer protect the site with armed U.S. Navy security forces because the site is on leased property (rather than MOD-ceded land) and the Navy had not obtained the specific authorization that would confer military installation status under the NATO SOFA and BIA.

5 (C) U.S. Navy lawyers have refuted the Italian argument, showing the series of approvals the U.S. obtained in transferring the base from its old leased site at Agnano (which the Navy has occupied since the 1950s, with all the privileges guaranteed under the SOFA), but Italian military lawyers have held firm. Their position threatens not only the viability of the base from a security standpoint, but also the tax-exempt status of the commissary, exchange, hospital and other operations on the base. I have asked La Russa to break the deadlock with a political declaration that Gricignano is a military installation, and he has promised to find a solution, but a signal from you that the security of our servicemembers is not negotiable will help make the matter a top priority for La Russa and empower him to impose and defend a political solution overcoming the consensus

legal opinions of his own staff.

U.S. Assertion of Jurisdiction in Abu Omar Case

¶6. (C) La Russa and his staff were helpful in persuading the Italian Ministry of Justice to weigh in to support the U.S. assertion of jurisdiction under the NATO SOFA in the case of USAF COL Romano, which was part of the larger "Abu Omar" trial. La Russa, while a successful and experienced lawyer, as MOD is not a key player in judicial matters and, like the rest of the cabinet, has very little influence over the highly independent Italian judiciary. We have raised our position repeatedly with all key Italian leaders, and La Russa understands that this continues to be an important issue for the U.S. military. La Russa will want to offer what help he can, but may plead powerlessness before a headstrong judiciary that remains locked in a bitter long-running conflict with PM Berlusconi over past corruption cases.

JSF: La Russa May Ask for More Industrial Participation

¶7. (C) The Joint Strike Fighter is Italy's top modernization goal and serves to guarantee continued U.S.-Italian interoperability, cooperation, and joint operations for decades into the future. MOD Undersecretary Crosetto visited Washington and Fort Worth in November to push for greater Italian industrial participation in the JSF project. Crosetto met with USD (ATL) Carter on the matter -- without much success -- and may push La Russa to raise it with you. Italy has a USD 1.9 billion commitment in JSF, making it our largest bilateral Defense Cooperation in Armaments (DCA) program with the Italians. Hearing from you that the U.S. values Italy's special role in the program and that our joint future with the JSF bolsters our strong relationship will be helpful in keeping the focus on the strategic gains that cooperation brings to both sides.

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An Important Partnership

¶8. (C) Mr. Secretary, the La Russa-Frattini team has come through for us on a number of key issues: they have supported us on Kosovo, agreed to retain high troop levels in UNIFIL during the transition to Spanish command, and came up with a courageous commitment to the next phase of operations in Afghanistan. They are a team that works, is instinctively pro-American, and is highly sensitive to how Italy is perceived by the U.S. Government. Your visit will pay substantial dividends for the U.S.-Italy relationship for the foreseeable future.

THORNE